

A Reflection on Humanness through the Lens of Science Fiction

An Honors Thesis (HONR 499)

by

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Abstract

This thesis explores and attempts to better understand what makes us human through the lens of science fiction novels. The novels analyzed include *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* by Philip K Dick (1968), *Planet of the Apes* by Pierre Boulle (1963), and *Where Late the Sweet Birds Sang* by Kate Wilhelm (1976). Science fiction can be used to reveal how people make moral and intellectual sense of the world, and these three novels all share a common focus on what it means to be human by contrasting humans with groups of beings who were not quite human. I have chosen to analyze these three novels in particular because they each highlight different aspects of what makes one human. I will analyze these different aspects of what make us human, focusing on the themes of individuality, creativity, and empathy, among others.

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Process Analysis

I had read *Where Late the Sweet Birds Sang* in an honors class previously and thoroughly enjoyed the conversation my class had. Later, in another class, I read *Planet of the Apes*, and I enjoyed analyzing this book as well, so my thesis advisor, who was also the professor for that class, suggested I do something similar for my thesis, but that I also include *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep*. The issue was that I majored in biology and chemistry, so the majority of my college career was science, science, science. The one break from that came with my honors classes. They offered different material and a different way of thinking. So, I decided to write a humanities paper on what it means to be human.

Toward the beginning of the process, I was really struggling with where I was going to go with this thesis. I had my topic and my proposal was approved, but I did not know where to begin. This thesis was different than most of the papers that I had to write during my college career because most of those were research papers, so this was really a whole other experience. I made an outline at the suggestion of my advisor to try and give my paper direction, but I was still struggling to see where I was going with this. It was not until I just sat down and started writing that this thesis really began to take shape.

At first, I tried to write something without including any passages from the novels, and then I realized that was insane because the whole point of my paper was to analyze these texts. I went back through the novels and picked out the passages that really stood out to me. I then reflected on and analyzed these.

A little bit of a wrench was thrown my way while writing this thesis because of the university shut-down in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. I had to transition to online

classes and move back home in the middle of the semester, which disrupted a lot of things. Events I was sure I was going to get to do, I was not able to. I missed out on my senior year of playing soccer. The commencement ceremony for graduation was cancelled. When the future you were planning on changes so suddenly, it can be kind of hard to focus. And despite the hurt caused by those who will not take this pandemic seriously and refuse to believe that this is a real issue and are putting even more people at risk of getting sick, this pandemic has allowed me to marvel at the strength of humanity just as much as my paper has.

This project allowed me to learn about myself. I am a lot stronger than I think I am. I grew as I wrote my paper. My analysis left me with a deeper understanding of what it means to be human. This whole process has shown me how human I am. I also learned about my learning process. I always knew I liked reading books, but I learned that I really enjoy reflection and literature analysis, both of which are seen very rarely in biology and chemistry.

I struggled with how to end the paper because I do not think we will ever be able to finish this conversation. Humans will always be surprising. There will always be something that sets humans apart. The ending is sort of open ended because I want to leave room in the conversation for people to add to it.

How should you, the reader, approach this project? This is my reflection on what it means to be human, and it was written during a time when humans had to show remarkable strength. Hopefully, it makes you think about this topic in a different way, and hopefully it helps you find what it means to be human.

Introduction

This thesis includes an analysis of the science-fiction books *Where Late the Sweet Birds Sang* by Kate Wilhelm, *Planet of the Apes* by Pierre Boulle, and *Do androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* by Philip K. Dick. I will be exploring what each of these novels say about humanity and ultimately what it means to be human. Each of these novels takes place in the future, but all three of these science fiction works were written over 40 years ago and are still relevant today. These novels were specifically chosen because each of these novels tells the story about how the human characters react to the events around them in contrast with a group of beings that are almost, but not quite, human. Each one explores what would happen if the human-like characters lacked distinguishing characteristics, such as individuality, creativity, or empathy, that would make them human if they possessed them, and the stories told explore what separates the almost-human groups from the actual humans due to that deficit. Empathy is a common theme found in all three novels, but especially in *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* Throughout the text, I will reflect on and analyze passages from these three works of science fiction that reveal different aspects of what it means to be human and differentiate the almost-human groups from the humans. Before I get to the passage analyses, I want to preface them with a brief summary of the books.

Overview

In *Where Late the Sweet Birds Sang*, humankind was facing the threat of extinction, and so a farming family developed a cloning method in order to preserve the human race. The method was effective, but they gradually began to notice that the clones were not the same as

them. The clones stuck close to their own kind, and they did not seem to need to communicate completely verbally. Eventually, as time passed only the populations of clones survived due to the sterility of the original humans. As the clones began to run out of resources for their cloning procedures, they decided to send out a small group on an expedition. This is where one particular clone, Molly, changed due to the isolation she experienced on the expedition and became an individual, a single being separate from the group of clones. Another clone, Ben, experienced something similar but not to the same extent, and he and Molly had a son Mark. Mark had the same artistic gifts as Molly, and when he grew up, he was eventually able to start a new society made up of former clones who were able to become individuals and humans.

In *Planet of the Apes*, Ulysses was a journalist who, by good luck or otherwise, found himself on a trip through space, where he and a small group of spacefarers discovered a planet that they then named Soror. Upon landing on this planet, they discovered that the creatures that looked human were actually mute and behaved like animals, while the intellectuals of the planet resembled the apes of Earth. Ulysses was mistaken as a human of Soror, and he was captured by a hunting party and placed in the laboratory of the chimpanzee-scientist Zira. Ulysses managed to convince Zira and later her fiancé Cornelius that he was really an intelligent being. These two apes taught Ulysses everything there was to know about their planet of Soror, and in return he told them of his home planet Earth. Eventually Ulysses was able to talk at a large convention of ape scientists in order to convince them that he possessed an intellect and he succeeded. The story ended with Ulysses finally finding a way back to Earth where he found that due to the passage of time that occurred at a different rate as one traveled through space, the humans had turned savage and the apes were the intelligent ones.

In *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* a nuclear war has wiped many species out and has endangered the rest. The humans who could afford it moved off world to Martian colonies. The manufacture and use of androids is legal in the Martian colonies, but when a few androids escape to earth, a bounty hunter named Rick Deckard is hired to “retire” these six rogue highly capable and dangerous Nexus-6 androids, which proves to be a very difficult job because the only way to tell the androids from humans is when a Voigt-Kampff empathy test that is impossible for the androids to pass is administered. Rick Deckard would not be doing this job if it did not pay well because he is trying to save up enough money to buy a real animal to replace his electric sheep.

Where Late the Sweet Birds Sang

In *Where Late the Sweet Birds Sang*, Molly sets out on an expedition with a few other clones, and there among the endless trees and wilderness, the clones become very aware of the loneliness and isolation one feels when alone in the woods. Molly is forever changed by this experience and becomes an individual. When she returns, the rest of the clones are not sure what to do with her because there are no individuals in their society. Ben, one of the clones who joined Molly on the expedition as a doctor, was assigned to monitor her condition after they returned from the expedition, but Ben had changed too, though not to the extent that Molly had.

“But [Molly] could talk with Ben, she thought. They could relive the trip with each other, they could try to understand what happened, for whatever had happened to her had happened to him. She could see it in his face, in the way he had turned so abruptly from her drawing. Something lay within him, ready to awaken, ready to whisper to him, if he would let it, just as it lay within and changed the world she saw. It spoke to her, in dreams, in visions that passed fleetingly through her mind. She watched him where he stood, with the sun shining on him. Light fell on his arms in a way that made

each hair gleam golden, a forest of golden trees on a brown plain. He shifted and the twilight on the plain turned the trees black.

... The difference was in her expression, [Ben] thought suddenly. Physically, she was identical to Miriam, to the other sisters, only the expression was changed. She looked more mature, harder? That wasn't it, but he thought it was close to what he meant. Determined. Deeper." (pg. 111-112)

This passage establishes that Molly has changed and is now different from her clone sisters, and Ben noticed that Molly had become her own person. Molly (and Ben) could now do things that none of the other clones could. She could talk *with* Ben. They could have a discussion together that the other clones could not participate in because a discussion is an exchange of ideas. Humans also have the ability to connect with others, and we have the ability to love and serve others (we have empathy). The other clones had no need for discussions because they all shared each other's thoughts.

Aside from being able to have a discussion, Molly grew and became an individual. She was able to find meaning in the art she created. The other clones could not do this. They had no need to since they did not need to communicate ideas since they all share a collective mind. The beauty of individuality is that we give meaning to different things. Because the clones were connected in a sort of hive mind, Molly's painful experience of growth and becoming individualized had a negative impact on the other clones.

"Barry was shaking his head. "Psychology is a dead end for us," he said. "It revives the cult of the individual. When a unit is functioning, the members are self-curing. As for letting her (Molly) remain in the hospital... She is a constant source of pain and confusion to her sisters. Meg will be all right, but Molly didn't even know her sister had fallen, had a broken arm. The sisters needed her and she didn't answer. We all know and agree it is our duty to safeguard the well-being of the unit, not the various individuals withing it, if there is a conflict between those two choices, we must abandon the individual. That is a given. The only question is how." (pg. 124)

The clones functioned in a utilitarian society. They believed in the good of the whole over the individual. Therefore, the very science minded clones would have condemned a cult that venerated being an individual. What is ironic is that to any human it would appear like the clones are in a cult that reveres being a collective. This passage reveals a distinguishing factor between the clones and the humans. The clones were self-curing. They could heal emotional pain with their shared mind. The flip side of this was that they could also hurt each other, such as in the case of Molly. Molly's becoming an individual meant that she could no longer share the thoughts and feelings of her sisters because her thoughts and feeling were now her own. This hurt her clone sisters. Maybe it was because they felt isolated and abandoned by Molly, but Molly would have felt isolated from them too, especially because she was now alone with her thoughts and here clone sisters still had each other; she was just better prepared for that isolation because she had gone on the expedition and spent time alone in the woods.

The clones were not an altruistic group. They wanted to get rid of Molly as fast as they could because she was causing them pain. Sometimes humans are selfish too, but we have the ability to overcome this and act selflessly whereas I do not think the clones could do this. Not all humans are altruistic, but there are many humans who would selflessly sacrifice themselves for the well-being of others. Harriet Tubman and Mother Theresa are good examples. And many others in our everyday lives.

We also see the altruistic nature of humans every time we go out in public. There are brail signs for the people who are blind and ramps to make spaces more accessible to the people who are disabled. There is usually an option to turn on close captioning for the hard of hearing community. Even if humans are not perfect, we still work to try and include as many people as we can. Every human is different from each other. This is something we should treasure because

this is what makes us individuals. Our differences are what makes us the same. Perhaps this is the reason humans can empathize with one another. We all have different experiences, but this is what we all have in common. It is something we can all relate to. This contrasts with the clones because they were all the same. Being different meant that every member of their community could feel the pain that comes with feeling isolated from each other. One clone explains to Mark the benefits that come with being identical: “For the first time since mankind walked the face of the earth,” he said, “There will be no misfits.” Mark responds, “And no geniuses” (pg. 166)

If we did not have misfits, our society would not grow. The clones all looked the same, all experienced the same experiences, and all thought the same thoughts. Individuality is a very good thing. We need our differences because otherwise everyone would be the same and life would be boring. Our differences have meaning. Our differences allow us to think differently from one another, and then to get others to think differently than they normally would. Individual experiences cause different reactions in people, different responses, different ideas. If everyone were the same and we all thought the same, there would be no way to grow even if we needed to because growth is a result of adversity, and adversity only comes from the differences. Humans can adapt to change, even if we do not like it. The clones suffered from inadaptability and this is why their community eventually fails in the book.

Because we do not have a hive mind, and we want to share our experiences with others we communicate. I think the highest way to do this is to create art.

“There was a snow sculpture standing in the center of the courtyard between the new dorms. It was a male figure, eight feet tall, nude, its legs fused into a base that was also a pedestal. In one hand the figure carried a club, or perhaps a torch, and the other hand swung at its side. The feeling of motion, of life, had been captured. It was a man on his way to somewhere else, striding along, not to be stopped.

“Mark?” Barry asked

“Who else?”

Barry approached it slowly; there were others looking at it also, mostly children. A few adults were there, and others came out until there was a crowd about the statue. A small girl stared, then turned and began to roll a snowball. She threw it at the figure. Barry caught her arm before she could throw again.

“Don’t do that,” he said.

She looked at him blankly, looking at the figure even more blankly, and started to inch away. He released her, and she darted back through the people. Her sisters ran to her. They touched each other as if to reassure themselves that all was well.

“What is it?” one of them asked, unable to see over the heads of the people between her and the statue.

“Just snow,” the little girl answered. “It’s just snow.”

Barry stared at her. She was about seven, he thought. He caught her again, and this time lifted her so she could see. “Tell me what that is,” he said.

She wriggled to get loose. “Snow,” she said. “It’s snow.”

“It’s a man,” he said sharply.

She looked at him in bewilderment and glanced at the figure again. Then she shook her head. One by one he held other small children up to see. All they saw was snow.

... “So the younger children can’t see that it’s supposed to be the figure of a man. What does that matter?” Andrew asked.

“I don’t know,” Barry said slowly. And he didn’t know why it was important, only that it was.” (pg. 189-190)

The later generations of clones could not determine what the shape was because they were losing the ability to apply meaning to things.

It is important to pay attention to the way that Barry describes the statue of the man. The snow man is completing actions... standing...carried a club...swung his arm. Barry notes that these aspects capture “the feeling of motion, of life.”

The image of a human in motion is significant because it signifies that humans are always moving forward, progressing, adapting to their new environments. At least, that is what we like to think. Meanwhile the clones were stagnant, and even regressing. This is why I think Mark put the statue on a pedestal. He would have done this because he thought that humans were better

than clones. He looked down on the clones and their unwillingness to change and grow, their unwillingness to progress forward.

Mark is human because he was able to create the statue. The little girl is a clone because she cannot see that the snow is supposed to represent something. Barry is stuck somewhere in the middle. Nowhere in the passage does Barry interpret the meaning of the statue, but he does recognize that it is important. Barry still has the potential to become human. People can become more human. There are some actions that are more human than others. Barry could not articulate why it was important that the children could not determine what the statue was. All he knew was that they could not understand art. Why is this important? The function of art is to invoke a feeling or emotion, inspire an idea or thought, have a conversation with the viewer. Because the younger clones could not see or understand the art, this shows that they are losing the ability to feel and experience emotion, two things humans do very deeply even if sometimes they try not to.

Art was a huge difference between the clones and the humans, represented in Molly and Mark. Where the clones just saw a pile of snow, Molly and Mark would see the figure of a human. Even though it is essentially just snow, Molly and Mark could give it meaning and allowed it to become something else.

Planet of the Apes

Art is the highest form of communication, especially of communication of thoughts, feelings, and emotions. Communication is something that is used by many living things at the base level. Language is something we use every day, but we often do not think about how we are

the only ones to use it. In *Planet of the Apes*, the apes could use language while the humans on their planet could not. Ulysses was a human from earth who found himself on Soror where he had to convince the apes that he too could use language.

“Listen to me, O Apes! For I can talk, and not, I assure you, like a mechanical toy or a parrot. I can think, I can talk, I can understand what you say just as what I myself say. Presently, if Your Lordship deign to question me, I shall deem it an honor to reply to your questions to the best of my ability.

But first I should like to reveal this astounding truth to you: not only am I a rational creature, not only does a mind paradoxically inhabit this human body, but I come from a distant planet, from Earth, that Earth on which, by a whim of nature that has still to be explained, it is men who are the repositories of wisdom and reason. I beg permission to point out the place of my origin, not of course for the benefit of the illustrious doctors whom I see all around me, but for those of my audience who perhaps are not so well acquainted with the various stellar systems...

Thus, on Earth the intellect is embodied in the human race. This is a fact and I can do nothing about it. Whereas apes- and since discovering your world I am deeply upset about this- whereas the apes have remained in a state of savagery, it is the men who have evolved. It is in man's cranium that the brain has developed and flourished. It is man who invented language, discovered fire, made use of tools. It is man who settled my planet and changed its face, man, in fact, who established a civilization so refined that in many respects, O Apes, it resembles your own.” (pg. 124-125)

Ulysses' speech to the convention of ape scientists served the purpose of convincing them that he is a rational being, like them. Ulysses lists specific characteristics to prove his rationality. He can think and talk. He says he is a rational creature with a mind. Everything that he states here helps to prove that he is a rational being, but it does not differentiate him from the apes. It only serves to show that he is rational like the apes of Soror. So at this point, Ulysses has shown that the apes of Soror and the humans of Earth are rational beings who can think and talk.

Ulysses goes on to explain man's accomplishments on earth. Men are the repositories of wisdom and reason and intellect is embodied in the human race. He explained that it was man

who discovered and invented language, fire, and tools, and it was man who established a civilization.

We define a civilization to be the most advanced stage of human social and cultural development and organization. Ulysses reflects on this as well.

“What is it that characterizes a civilization? Is it the exceptional genius? No, it is everyday life...hmm! Let us give intelligence its due. Let us concede that it is principally the arts, and first and foremost, literature. Is the latter really beyond the reach of our higher apes, if it is admitted that they are capable of stringing words together? Of what our literature is made? Masterpieces? Again, no. But once an original book has been written – and no more than one or two appear in a century – men of letters *imitate* it, in other words, they copy it so that hundreds of thousands of books are published on exactly the same theme, with slightly different titles and modified phraseology. This should be able to be achieved by apes, who are essentially imitators, provided, of course, that they are able to make use of language.” (pg. 150)

Humans are the only ones that use language and have civilizations in real life. Is language just the term we use for human communication? Or is there something that separates language from communication? Other species can communicate, but they do not have language. Maybe the difference is that language can be either spoken or written. But historically there were humans that communicated without the use of written language. In the book, the apes could use language. They learned it through imitation, which is also how humans learn language. The difference is that humans can use language creatively, to write literature, which apes rarely did. Essentially humans can assign new meaning using language. One example – we give meaning to things by giving them names.

“You did say, didn’t you, that your apes possess a highly developed sense of mimicry?”

“They mimic us in everything we do, I mean in every act that does not demand a rational process of thought. So much so that with us the verb *ape* is synonymous with *imitate*.”

“Zira,” Cornelius murmured, as though depressed, “is it not this sense of *aping* that characterizes us so well?”

Without giving Zira time to protest, he went on excitedly, “It begins in childhood. All our education is based on imitation.”

“It’s the orangutans...”

“That’s it. They are of tremendous importance, since it is they who mold our youth through their books. They force every young monkey to repeat all the errors of his ancestors. That explains the slowness of our progress. For the last two thousand years we have remained similar to ourselves.”

This slow development among the apes deserves a few comments. I had been struck by it while reading their history, noticing in it some important differences from the soaring flight of the human mind. True, we also have known a period of semi-stagnation. We, too, have had our orangutans, our falsified education and ridiculous curricula, and this period lasted a long time.

Not so long, however, as in the apes’ case, and above all not at the same stage of evolution. The dark ages that the chimpanzee deplored had lasted about ten thousand years. During this period no notable progress had been achieved except, perhaps, during the last half century. But what I found extremely curious was that their earliest legends, their earliest chronicles, their earliest *memories* bore witness to a civilization that was already well advanced and in fact was more or less similar to that of the present day. These documents, ten thousand years old, afforded proof of general skills and achievements comparable to the skills and achievements of today; and, before them, there was a total blank: no tradition either oral or written, not a single clue. In essence, it seemed as though the simian civilization had made a miraculous appearance out of the blue ten thousand years before and had since been preserved more or less without modification. ...

“There are apes capable of original creation,” Zira protested.

“Certainly,” Cornelius agreed. “That’s true, especially in recent years. In the long run, mind is able to embody itself in gesture. It has to, in fact; that’s the natural course of evolution... but what I’m passionately seeking Zira, what I’m trying to find out is how it all began... at present it strikes me as not possible that it was through simple imitation at the beginning of our era.”

“Imitation of what, of whom?” (pg. 143-144)

The apes learned through imitation. Their civilization began because they imitated the human civilization before them. They only inherited one from the humans who lived before them. They could build buildings, create art because humans did it first.

Apes learn through imitation, but so do humans. We all learn to talk by imitating our parents and most of our early education is memorization of information. But humans can also learn in ways other than imitation. We can hypothesize and experiment to see whether the

predictions are correct. The apes were incapable of this, and I think this is due to the fact that the apes were not able to teach younger generations how to do this.

Maybe it is fair to say that the apes could create things, but not invent things. But I think creation has an element of invention to it. So, the apes were not really creating. They were just re-creating.

The apes could learn, but they could not teach. This is proven when it is later discovered that the ape civilization only came to be after it took over the human civilization that came before it. Cornelius found proof when an ancient human doll that could talk was discovered, proving that the humans were intelligent and rational beings before the apes were, and the only reason the apes now had a civilization was because they imitated the humans that came before them. This angered Zaius and he wanted to destroy Ulysses and his son because he was afraid that a human resurgence would occur.

Zaius's actions would not be surprising if the roles were reversed and a human had been in Zaius's place. Actually, I want to take this a step further and think through what would happen if all the roles in *Planet of the Apes* were reversed, and an ape came to Earth and had to convince the humans of his rationality. What would be the distinguishing feature that separated the ape from the humans?

There has to be one, otherwise we would not insist on calling the rational ape an ape and we would instead call the interstellar visitor human. This is the exact reason I think Ulysses returns to earth (not just because Zaius is after him but because returning to earth has always been Ulysses's goal). Ulysses wants to be with the people he belongs with. Otherwise he would have stayed on Soror. There is a difference between him and the apes. It is difficult to determine

that difference, but it has to be something other than looks because not every human looks the same, but we know when someone is human and when they are not.

Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?

I think what makes it so hard to determine what differentiates the apes in this book from humans is that the apes had empathy like humans do, but in *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* the androids lack empathy though they look exactly like humans. This makes it very easy to determine the difference between the humans and androids, but it is still worth taking a closer look at this book.

Human empathy is established early on in the book when Rick Deckard has a conversation with his neighbor about the animals that they own.

“My horse,” Barbour declared beamingly, “is pregnant.” ...

“Ever thought of selling your horse?” Rick asked. He wished to god he had a horse, in fact any animal. Owning and maintaining a fraud had a way of gradually demoralizing one. And yet from a social standpoint it had to be done, given the absence of the real article. He had therefore no choice except to continue. Even were he not to care himself, there remained his wife, and Iran did care. Very much.

Barbour said, “It would be immoral to sell my horse.”

“Sell the colt, then. Having two animals is more immoral than not having any.”

(pg. 9)

That last line could be taken as commentary on capitalism. It would be immoral to have so much wealth while others barely have enough to survive. But in this book, it was also considered immoral to own no animal. This is why Rick has been lying about owning a live sheep. He desperately wants to own a real animal because it would boost his social status. But if owning two animals is considered immoral, how could not owning any animals also be immoral? It would be immoral to not own any animals because it would be anti-empathetic to not take care

of and safeguard them, which were dying out, because empathy extends to taking care of the earth and living things around us. This is what separated the androids from the humans

The androids were not interested in owning animals because they did not have empathy. One of the escaped androids, Pris, even went as far as pulling the legs off of a spider since androids were made with a defect that did not allow them to experience empathy. Rachael, who was a Nexus-6 android initially unbeknownst to her, seemed to care about animals when she thought she was human, or at least she cared about the social status that came with owning an owl, which were believed to be extinct.

I think the significance of the animals was that they meant something to the humans, but they did not have any meaning to the androids. They were just animals to the androids, and “For Rick Deckard an escaped humanoid robot, which had killed its master, which had been equipped with an intelligence greater than that of many human beings, which had no regard for animals, which possessed no ability to feel empathetic joy for another life form’s success or grief at its defeat – that, for him, epitomized The Killers.” (pg. 30)

This shows that the androids had no empathy for the animals that were left on earth. This made it very easy for Rick to associate them as killers and things that needed to be destroyed instead of as living beings. The bounty hunters used different terms in order to try and give less meaning to the action of ending an android’s life. One android noted “You have no difficulty viewing an android as inert,” the girl said. “So you can ‘retire’ it, as they say.” (pg. 38)

Is retiring an android morally the same or different than killing a person? The same action that is taken to retire an android would also kill a human if that was the situation. Rick does not see the androids as living things. Actually, I think at the beginning of the book, Rick tries to convince himself that the androids are not living things because that makes his job easier.

Should we have empathy for the androids? All they wanted was to be human. Empathy allows us to connect to other humans and the androids wanted to be included in this. They were jealous.

The humans did not see the androids as human, and the androids wanted to belong like humans belonged. A report on one of the escaped androids reveals that the androids were searching for a group experience similar to Mercerism, which humans participated in through use of an empathy box.

“...[Roy Baty] proposed the group escape attempt, underwriting it ideologically with a pretentious fiction as to the sacredness of the so-called android “life.” In addition, this android stole, and experimented with, various mind-fusing drugs, claiming when caught that it hoped to promote in androids a group experience similar to that of Mercerism, which it pointed out remains unavailable to androids.”

The account had a pathetic quality. A rough, cold android, hoping to undergo and experience from which, due to a deliberately built-in defect, it remained excluded. (pg. 169-170)

Empathy does not just apply to other humans. We need to have empathy for animals too and all living things. The androids were not technically living, but somehow it still seems appropriate to feel for them. This account shows that some of the humans did not believe that the androids were alive, but I disagree. I think the androids were most definitely alive, as is shown in this conversation between Rick and Rachael: “If you weren’t an android,” Rick interrupted, “if I could legally marry you, I would.” Rachael said, “Or we could live in sin, except that I’m not alive.” “Legally you’re not. But really you are. Biologically. You’re not made out of transistorized circuits like a false animal; you’re an organic entity.” (pg. 181)

Here Rachel states that she is not alive. I think she may believe this because she has recently found out that she is not human, and there is a difference between the androids being alive and them being human. Rick argues that she is a living organism. This shows that while

Rick originally saw the androids as merely a target, he eventually came to have empathy for the androids and see them as living beings.

In biology, we are taught that there are seven characteristics that every living thing must possess in order to be considered a living organism. They must have some sort of organization or structure, metabolism, homeostasis, growth, reproductive abilities, response to stimuli, and be able to adapt to their environment/undergo evolution. However, this is inadequate because there are living things that do not fit these criteria. For example, a mule is the result of a horse and a donkey and it cannot reproduce as it is sterile but logically we know that it is a living organism even though it does not fit all of the criteria that determines whether something is a living organism or not. My point is that there are exceptions. Our definition for what makes something a living organism is relative. Maybe what makes someone human is relative too. Sometimes humans have characteristics that other things have that are not considered human (apes, clone, androids) Sometimes there are humans that lack certain qualities that most humans have but they are still human (sociopaths). There are always exceptions. Is there an absolute that defines what it means to be human? If there is we probably can't know it because humans are imperfect.

However, I think there is an important distinction to make. Rachael says she is not alive, she does not say that she is not a living organism. I think she is alive though. She has a mind. She feels angry betrayed upset when she finds out that her memories are false.

“Rick,” [Iran] said, “I have to tell you something. I’m sorry. The goat is dead.”

For some reason it did not surprise him; it only made him feel worse, a quantitative addition to the weight shrinking him from every side. “I think there’s a guarantee in the contract,” he said. “If it gets sick within ninety days the dealer – “

“It didn’t get sick. Someone” – Iran cleared her throat and went on huskily – “someone came here, got the goat out of its cage, and dragged it to the edge of the roof.”

“And pushed it off?” he said.

“Yes.” She nodded.

“Did you see who did it?”

“I saw her very clearly,” Iran said. “...A small young-looking girl with dark hair and large black eyes, very thin. Wearing a long fish-scale coat. She had a mail-pouch purse. And she made no effort to keep us from seeing her. As if she didn’t care.”

“No, she didn’t care,” he said. “Rachael wouldn’t give a damn if you saw her; she probably wanted you to, so I’d know who had done it.” ...

“It’s so awful. So needless.”

He turned toward his parked car, opened the door, and got in behind the wheel. “Not needless,” he said. “She had what seemed to her a reason.” An android reason, he thought. (pg. 209)

Rachael wanted Rick to know it was her who had killed his goat because she knew it would mean something to him that she had killed it. With this action, Rachael proved her lack of empathy and solidified it as the difference between humans and androids.

Rachael’s actions had meaning, but she did not have empathy. In this way, I think Rachael is similar to Frankenstein’s monster. She was created and then instead of teaching her right from wrong, she was given false memories and left to navigate the rest on her own. No one took the time to teach her how to empathize. Can empathy be taught?

We may not understand Rachael’s actions. We do not always understand other people’s reasons either, but we can empathize with them. The fact that Rick can empathize with Rachael despite what she has done highlights the difference between the empathy that humans have and the lack of empathy of the androids.

She seemed more externally composed now. But still fundamentally frantic and tense. Yet, the dark fire waned; the life force oozed out of her, as he had so often witnessed before with other androids. The classic resignation. Mechanical, intellectual acceptance of that which a genuine organism – with two billion years of the pressure to live and evolve hagridding it – could never have reconciled itself to.

“I can’t stand the way you androids give up,” he said savagely. (pg. 184)

This shows that the androids are almost human, but not quite. Religion is an important theme in *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?*, and though the characters practice Mercerism,

I think some interesting parallels can be made with Christianity. Just like in the Bible when God created humans in his likeness, humans created the androids in their likeness. In the Bible, God wants the best for His creation but understood that humans are flawed and not perfect like Him. Just so, the androids are not exactly like humans. They are missing something that separates them from their creators, and they are unhappy.

Conclusion

Humans are intelligent individuals with rational minds. Humans can invent and create art and use language. Humans have empathy. Throughout the course of these books the main themes of individuality, creativity, and empathy are what define the humans. Maybe what makes us human is that the difference between being human and being something else is undefinable because our definition of what it means to be human is relative.

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